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ABSTRACT

In 1988 a research team at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) completed a study entitled "Developing Partnerships" that documented and analyzed library-based information services for distance education students in Northern Ontario. (The project was funded as part of the Province of Ontario initiative called Contact North/Contact Nord which was designed to promote distance education across Northern Ontario.) That study focused on two dimensions of interdependence in distance education: the learner and the available library services, and the librarian and the distance educator. Focusing on a third level of interdependence--the learner's interdependence with peers and tutors during the actual course of study--this paper describes a conceptual Developing Partnerships model that is designed to operationalize the recommendations of the study. It is noted that the components of the model are familiar, but that the challenge of the model lies in the interdependence of these components. Another challenge--that of exclusion, or inadequate communication between library and distance education staff or students who are "invisible" to library staff--is also explored, and seven key mechanisms from the model are suggested for reducing exclusion and promoting interdependence: (1) program and course planning; (2) services marketing; (3) resources development; (4) professional development; (5) service and materials delivery; (6) technical communications; and (7) data access. It is concluded that quality distance education requires an ongoing relationship between the individuals and institutions, and that it is up to the administrators, teachers, library staff, and students to make these recommendations a reality. (19 references) (SD)

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Interactive Libraries; Dimensions of Interdependence

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Paper for the ICDE - O.U. Conference
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"Interactive Libraries; Dimensions of Interdependence"

In 1988 a research team at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) completed a study entitled Developing Partnerships that documented and analyzed the based services for distance education students in Northern Ontario.

This research study focussed in effect on two dimensions of interdependence in distance education: the learner and the available library services, and the librarian and the distance educator. We believe that without paying careful attention to the development of these two dimensions, the third level of interdependence - the learner's interdependence with peers and tutor during the actual course - will not be reached.

In fact, this third level should be possible now more than ever before. The technologies exist today to facilitate real and delayed time interactions so that one learner may "talk" with peers, a tutor, a guest instructor, librarians, counsellors and adminstrative staff. But that interaction, that interdependence, demands more than just reliable technologies. It demands students who feel assertive, are in control and are able to interact with a variety of learning resources and staff services. Interdependence also demands material resources and staff services from libraries. Those resources and services, and their "mix" are now becoming more accessible to distance learners. Librarians and their materials can connect in ways they could not dream about five years ago: databases exist to present much larger "worlds" to learners, and library

staff can "connect" with each other and with students via computer, telephone and FAX to help interpret and manage selected research trips through that world.

But that is the potential: What is the reality? Do learners even know what they ought to be able to expect from a library? Do institutions set up infrastructures to promote connections between librarians and educators, librarians and learners, librarians and librarians? Do librarians operate with adequate or appropriate conceptual models? Do librarians want to learn more about learners and learning; should they, in fact?

We know what the four answers to these questions ought to be, but what are the answers at the moment?

Our research in 1988 focussed on these and other questions. It was our opinion that a publicly funded research project should do more than simply collect descriptive statistics via survey instruments sent to librarians; rather, it should dig at the needs, opinions and preconceptions of the client group and involve the researchers in proposing realistic but innovative, even provocative solutions. Our choice of project title, Developing Partnerships, proved to be more an idealistic one than an actual descriptor, but more of that anon.

The project was funded as part of the Province of Ontario initiative called Contact North/Contact Nord (CN/CN) to promote distance education across Northern Ontario. The Northeastern Regional Coordinating Centre of CN/CN allocated the major funding for the project with assistance from the Ontario Council of University Continuing Education (OCUCE), OISE and Laurentian University. The study was directed by four major objectives, and was supported by specified assumptions.

Objectives, Assumptions and Issues

The objectives were to document the following: how distance learners currently manage with the present level of material resources and human services available from various libraries; what problems with resources and services are experienced directly by three constituencies -- the students, library staff and faculty; what ideas these constituents have for upgrading material resources and people-based services; and finally, what changes or continuities in library practice are needed in order to carry out realistic and creative recommendations for distance education development up to 1990.

Four basic assumptions supported the project design. First, distance education must now be more clearly defined: distance may in fact refer to psychological, economic or cultural separation, as well as to geographic distance. In fact, a high proportion of Canadian distance education students live in urban areas (Lumsden, 1988; Spronk, 1988), a phenomenon evident in other countries as well.

> 'Distance education' refers to those forms of organized learning which are based on the physical separation of learners and those (other than the learners themselves) involved in the organization of their learning. This separation may apply to the whole learning process or only to certain stages or elements of it. Both face-to-face and private study may be involved, but their function will be to supplement or reinforce the predominantly distance interaction. (Tight, 1988)

Second, the process of adult learning should enable the learner to confidently use her/his own knowledge and experience as well as that of others in the active construction of meaning, that is, adult learning should not place the learner in a situation of passive dependency and uncritical acceptance of others' knowledge. Third, those active and skilled learners will use their abilities to think critically and creatively in the development of their local and regional communities.

Fourth, library staff can be skilled and proactive mediators between information and the learner, a stance that is antithetical to the custodial concept.

Literature Survey

The literature survey revealed four types of studies: The traditional 'how to' (American Library Association, 1982), literature reviews (Haworth, 1982), allusions to library service within a general distance education context (Mugridge and Kaufman, 1986), and descriptions of actual services (Scott, 1988; Off-Campus Library Services Conference (Central Michigan University) Proceedings 1987, 1986; Gray, 1986; Miller, 1984; Winter, 1984; and Payne, 1982.)

With the exception of two writers (de Silva, 1988; Affleck, 1987) very little of the literature base informed our study. Discussions tended to be descriptive, empirical research virtually non-existent, and conceptual thinking extremely rare.

Crossing over into the literature of library service to adult learners in non-institutional settings, we found material of varying usefulness. In the U.S., discussion began with the landmark study by Smith (1954), but there have been few studies addressing the issue of the way in which adult learning processes should affect the work of library staff. Fine (1984) points out that library-based researchers do not focus on ways adults obtain and process information via library systems nor do these researchers attempt to develop a theory of user behaviour. Burge (1983) offered one proposal for a learner-centred view of adult services, but generally there is little evidence to suggest either strengthened ties between distance educators and library staff or the development of an adult learner-centred model of library user behaviour.

The Survey Instrument

We cannot do justice here to the development of the survey instruments, but each constituent group of respondents - students, university and college library staff, public library staff, and faculty - received a different questionnaire. Copies of the full questionnaires are published in the project report, available from CN/CN in Sudbury for a modest price. A total of 1750 questionnaires were mailed out. Response rates varied from 85% for university and college library staff, 50% for public library staff, 39% for faculty to 29% for students. Various statistical and coding procedures were used to analyze quantitative and qualitative information and we acknowledge the collaboration of other research staff at OISE and the invaluable advice and critical comments of the two advisory groups of librarians established in the earliest stages of the project. In addition to written data, we collected information from face-to-face and audio conferences with college, university and public librarians.

Results

Only a few highlights from each constituency can be included here. Readers are referred to the full report for statistical and descriptive detail. Public library staff responses indicated that students were known to use local public libraries but that the library staff knew very little about their programmes of study. Little use was made of a variety of communications technologies, but librarians were keen to exploit them if the issue of costs were solved. Staff were also open to learning about how adult learners function, but admitted very little existing knowledge.

Academic library staff admitted little or no involvement in course design and some feelings of isolation from distance education administrators. Staff also listed a range of factors

contributing to inappropriately low levels of services, and they struggled with solutions to beat the evident strains involved with distance education clients.

Instructors generally accepted prime responsibility for informing students about library services, yet appeared to take little significant action.

Student's responses generally indicated low and very traditional expectations of library services, and inadequate knowledge about them anyway! In short, very few constructive, dynamic or integrated library-education contexts were discovered.

When asked for opinions as to what the role of the library staff should be, respondents indicated that teaching information-gathering skills, supplying information, and helping students find information for themselves were all important tasks. There was some agreement that the library staff member is a valuable part of a course design team.

Recommendations

The data we received and the conclusions we drew from them made us consider developing recommendations that were not only practical, feasible, and gently provocative, but that would be situated within a conceptual model for interactive libraries. The model we developed to house our recommendations has familiar components if you look at each individually, but the challenge in this model lies in the interdependence of those components.

[See figure 1 next page]

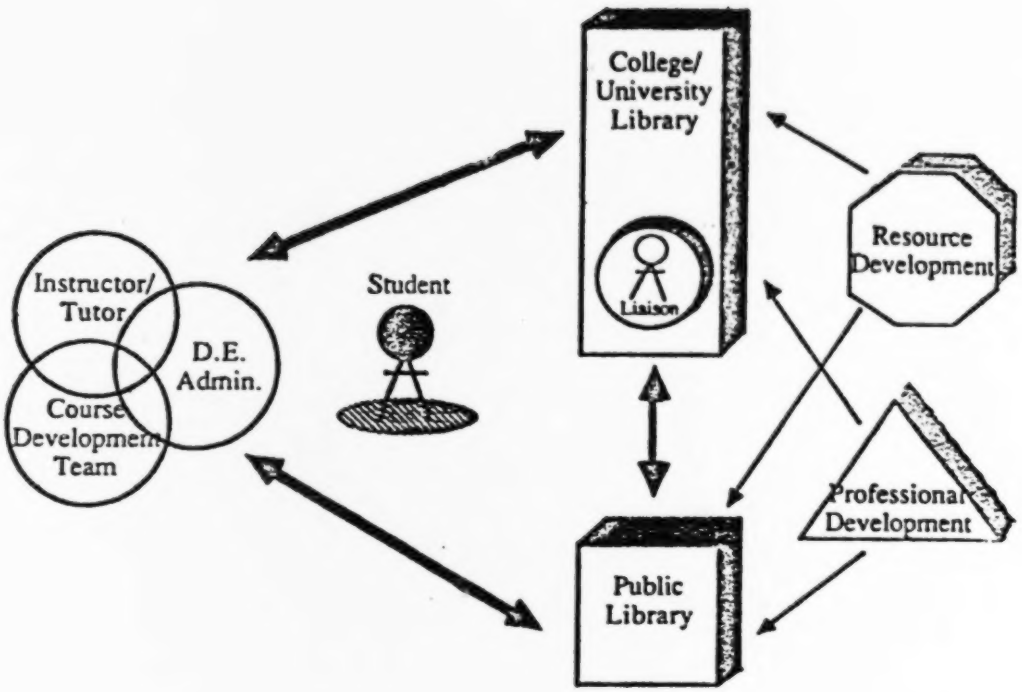

Figure 1 : Developing Partnerships Model

A second challenge lies in our refusal to promote the already dysfunctional levels of exclusion faced by library staff within their own institutions, or by students faced with the world of librarianship. We found that exclusion operated under one or more of these conditions:

- inadequate or no intra-institutional communication between library and distance education staff;
- "one-shot" orientation-to-library approaches to students;
- course designers who build library-based services out of courses;
- library staff who lack the knowledge of basic educational theory that would have otherwise allowed them to build partnerships with course designers and tutors based on the use of some common language about how adults learn;
- students who are totally invisible or anonymous to library staff -- not seen, not talked with, not written to;
- library staff who lack incentives and rewards to push themselves and their services beyond the familiarity and comfort of traditional routines;
- educators who adopt the transmission model of teaching ("give 'em fish") and who do not expect students to develop their own "fishing rods". (Burge, Snow & Howard, 1988)

We believe that exclusion ought to be reduced and interdependence encouraged by a dependence on seven key mechanisms that operate within the model: 1) Programme and course planning, 2) services marketing, 3) resource development, 4) professional development, 5) services and materials delivery, 6) technical communications, 7) data access.

Each mechanism carries with it certain recommendations that are specific to the Northern Ontario context, so for an international context we will select only one recommendation here for each of the seven mechanisms, in the hope that each mechanism will be accepted by readers as generic and capable of generating its own context specific guidelines for innovative practice.

With programme and course planning, our recommendations were based on the assigning of responsibility for distance education services to one library staff member, and adherence to an annual timetable of information transfer between library and distance education administration. These sound very obvious, but they do not happen automatically!

Regarding services marketing, we pleaded for advertising of professional quality - in part to compete for attention from adults already used to high quality public graphics and message design encountered in their other life roles.

Resource development refers to the most often cited problem with distance modes of learning - the provision of material resources that are adequate in quality and appropriate for the levels of learner ability evident in a course. One key recommendation was the proposal of a 35-40 square metre study space in public libraries, in part to help existing learners, in part to draw visible attention to the fact that lifelong learning is a reality for large numbers of adults. The other developmental mechanism concerned staff in libraries, and this one we saw as a major and urgent need. Librarians must have some familiarity with the concepts and facilitation practices of adult learning and the anxieties and needs of adult learners: we suggested therefore that librarians should use distance modes for their own learning, plan their own professional development, and involve interdisciplinary resource people to guide that development. We also suggested that the government set up a field development fund open to competitive bidding so that librarians, in ways similar to faculty, can apply for research and development monies.

For services and materials delivery we wanted to see, for example, standardization of video formats, headphones for video use in public libraries, FAX delivery of documents and Priority Post delivery of parcels. We did not stress computer conferencing because that asynchronous method of communication has only begun to be established, although this technology will be increasingly used to develop interdependence.

The technical communications mechanism should be strengthened by the provision of 24-hour toll-free telephone answering machines for all academic libraries, and a FAX machine for each academic and public library. Data access, the seventh mechanism to operate the model, is one that should become much easier to implement as libraries become more "connected" with each other. We recommended that an existing network linking most of the public libraries be reviewed and strengthened, because for many learners, the local library is the "one-stop shop" that should theoretically open many doors at the touching of a keyboard or the dialing of a phone.

Models and mechanisms are one thing, reality is another! We believe in the entrepreneurial potential and willingness to learn of library staff and we acknowledge the goals of educators for greater student satisfaction and success in distance courses. But neither will become reality until librarians and educators become more interactive and more interdependent in their own roles and relationships. Quality distance education requires an ongoing partnership between individuals and institutions: it is up to the administrators, teachers, library staff and students to make these recommendations a reality.

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